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The First-Year Composition Requirement: An Important Introduction to the Writing Center

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by **Andy Bourelle**, *University of Nevada, Reno*

Should first-year writing students be required to visit the writing center?



Andy Bourelle

I recall having a conversation with a colleague at another university about how to best inform students on campus that his Writing Center was a valuable resource—and that it even existed at all. This colleague was beginning his position as a writing center administrator after having tutored at the [University of Nevada, Reno's Writing Center](#), where I've worked for the past four years under Director Mark Waldo. I told my friend that one of the most effective ways the UNR Writing Center publicized its value was to ask the first-year composition teachers at the university to require their students to visit the center. His response was: "I want to help students who come [and] ask for it on their own, not simply increase the number of appointments to impress the university's administrators." This response perplexed me. Sure, I knew that teachers requiring students to use the Writing Center would bolster the number of tutoring appointments. But we have different intentions at UNR. There are, I believe, important pedagogical benefits when composition instructors strongly encourage students to visit a campus writing center. The composition classes, the writing center, and most importantly, the students all benefit from this practice.

Requiring students to use a writing center can be controversial.

The UNR Writing Center helps more than six thousand students a year; not all of these students are from first-year English courses. The center receives

students from more than five hundred different courses, representing every major on campus. We work with students at every stage of their academic careers, from incoming freshman to doctoral students writing their dissertations. At UNR, we strive to help students from every discipline. Thus, we hire from across the curriculum, employing graduate students from many programs in addition to teaching assistants from English. The center has no official connection to the English department; it is its own entity at the university.

Despite this independence from the English department, the center maintains an important relationship with the department's first-year composition program. During the beginning of each fall semester, Writing Center administrators make a one-hour presentation to new teaching assistants, providing a comprehensive look at the services the center provides. We encourage instructors to bring their students to the center for a tour and ask them to require their students to visit the center once. We do not demand this—nor do we have any authority to make such a demand. Rather, we encourage them to incorporate the requirement into their classes. We do, however, urge them to put some sort of deadline on the requirement to avoid an influx of procrastinators at the end of the semester (which admittedly still happens to some degree).

[S]ometimes we get students who aren't interested in having a productive tutoring session; they just want the "confirmation slip" needed to prove to their teachers that they came.

Not all English composition teachers agree to incorporate this "requirement" into their sections, but between all the courses offered, our center receives numerous first-year composition students. Because every student on campus, except those that transfer in after their freshman year, must take at least one first-year composition class, we are able to reach almost every student at the university during their first three semesters, helping us get the message out that the Writing Center is a valuable resource. Students are then free to use the Writing Center if and when they want to. They know where the center is, they've had the experience of working with a tutor, and they've seen firsthand what the Writing Center can do for them. Since one of the goals of the first-year composition program is to help undergraduate students prepare for the various writing contexts they'll face, this requirement furthers that goal by exposing students to a writing resource that can help them throughout their college careers. The approach our tutors take is not meant to help students "correct" or "fix" their papers. Rather, we tutor through a collaborative, socratic approach that is meant to help the student improve his or her own paper. We work with students on specific papers, but we want to help them improve as writers in the long run.

Requiring students to use a writing center can be controversial. Many teachers want their students to use the resource, but some resist making it a requirement. Students can be unreceptive to the help of tutors. Several tutors tell of difficult sessions because a student was required to come and therefore wasn't engaged. I tell the tutors it is their job to try to show the students the value of the center. Give them a good experience so they will come back voluntarily. It's unrealistic to think that this always happens, but it's been my experience that, more often than not, students required to use the Writing Center leave with a positive impression. However much they choose to use the center later, they've at least had that first good experience and now know what the Writing Center does.

Not requiring students to use the Writing Center means that most won't try it out. Few students do without a little encouragement. Because many students are pretty good writers and know it, they don't realize that a Writing Center isn't merely a tutoring service for remedial undergraduates. It's for all students, not just for those who struggle with writing, and regardless of skill level, all students can receive help there. Above all, we don't want a student to graduate—or worse, fail—without ever having been exposed to the university's Writing Center.

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Sure, there are drawbacks to teachers requiring Writing Center visits. Sometimes, despite repeated urging by center administrators for teachers to tell their students not to wait until the last minute, we get an influx of procrastinators at the end of the semester. And sometimes we get students who aren't interested in having a productive tutoring session; they just want the "confirmation slip" needed to prove to their teachers that they came. However, the alternative is much worse.

I worked with a student recently who illustrates this position perfectly. A senior nearing graduation, she came to the Writing Center for help with a graduate school personal statement. She said, "Wow, this was really helpful. I wish I had known about this place before. I would have used it a lot." Somehow she had slipped through the cracks and had made it to her senior year without ever using the Writing Center. Having a student about to leave college lamenting that she missed out on the benefits of the Writing Center is far worse than the center dealing with a small influx of procrastinators or having tutors deal with unmotivated students from time to time. Fortunately, what we usually hear at UNR is: "My English teacher made me go to the Writing Center once, and it turned out to be pretty helpful. I've been back a few times when I've needed help, and it's always been beneficial." While the UNR Writing Center serves the entire student body, it is in first-year composition that students can discover its unique resources.

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